

# Manchester Workmen to Build Own Houses

By W. P. CROZIER

**T**HERE is a shortage of houses in Manchester, England. Rents are fixed by the Government, and men of wealth are slow to invest in keeping with the home needs of the toilers. As a result the bricklayers have asked men of other trades to join them in an organization to build their own homes. Mr. Crozier tells the details of the very interesting plan.

Manchester, Eng., Feb., 1920.

**A** MOST interesting and important experiment for the building of artisans' houses is about to be made in Manchester. Everywhere in England at the present time large numbers of houses are needed and they are being built either not at all or very slowly. All kinds of authorities are in some measure or other at work upon the task and still the houses do not appear. Builders and contractors, municipalities and the state, which work through the Ministry of Health, are supposed to be doing what they can, but so far with a result which makes no impression at all on the needs of the population. Suddenly it has been proposed in Manchester that the bricklayers should form themselves into a group, should obtain the co-operation of all the other workmen whose labor goes to house-building, and should themselves build the houses without the intervention of builders or contractors. The scheme has been enthusiastically taken up by the trade unions concerned. Already there are signs that the same principle will be applied in other towns and there is every likelihood that before long a National Building Guild will be established for the construction of workmen's houses throughout the length and breadth of the country.

At a low estimate more than half a million houses are needed at this moment in the country. Manchester alone has an urgent need of twenty thousand, and if fifty thousand could be built within the next few years they would not do more than supply the probable needs of the population. The difficulties in the way consist partly in the enormous cost of present-day materials and labor and partly in the difficulty of obtaining sufficient workmen, especially bricklayers. It is estimated that a house which before the war cost \$2,000 to build could not now be erected for anything less than \$6,000. It is impossible for a landlord to let such houses for an economic rent. There are any number of houses whose rent is at present about \$200 which ought, on the basis of a true valuation of house property, to bring in a rent of nearer \$450. At the present moment landlords who suffer a severe injustice in this respect, are unable to obtain anything like an economic rental for their houses because all the houses below a certain rental value are protected by Rent Restrictions Acts up to the middle of 1921 and it is impossible for the landlords to raise the rents by more than ten per cent. Equally it would be almost impossible for landlords to obtain a fair rental for new houses which are erected on the present scale of costs. This is the reason why the state has had to intervene with subsidies and why, subsidies apart, builders are themselves averse from undertaking building work.

## Shortage of Labor

**F**URTHER, builders have found the greatest difficulty in obtaining adequate labor for the building of dwelling houses. Or, rather, they frequently have on hand construction work which is far more profitable to them than the building of houses which it will notoriously be difficult, if not impossible, to let at a fair rental. It is a much more profitable business to set up, for instance, an engineering works, a motor garage, or a picture theater than a row of workmen's dwellings. One of the complaints that is now being most widely made is that a great deal of what is called "luxury building" is steadily going on, while the masses

of the population cannot find houses in which to live, and our Ministry of Health has only lately issued regulations which will enable the municipal authorities to stop the erection of buildings which, in their opinion, is delaying the construction of new houses. No definite rules are laid down but it will be their duty to decide each case on its merits. The local authority, says a recent statement on this point, "will have to determine whether here and now in its own area such a ('luxury') building is delaying houses or whether it is of more importance than the erection of new houses. A new factory, for example, means more work, wages and production and its construction should be prohibited with the greatest diffidence. On the other hand, if there are no vacant houses in the district and new labor is likely to be attracted to the factory, it might be advisable to hold over the construction of a portion of the new building. It becomes a question of relative urgency."

Faced by all these difficulties, it occurred to the bricklayers of Manchester and their advisers, some of whom have long been interested in the idea of craftsmen's guilds, themselves independently to undertake to build a large number of workmen's dwellings. They therefore decided in the first place to form a Bricklayers' Guild Committee and to include on it representatives of all the chief trade unions whose labor would be needed if houses were to be built at all. This is not in itself a small matter, since, roughly speaking, a house cannot be built without the co-operation of each and all of the following trade union workmen: bricklayers, carpenters and joiners, stonemasons, painters, slaters and tilers, builder's laborers, woodcutting machinists, plasterers, paviors and street-masons. It was then decided that the Guild Committee should lay before the Manchester city council a formal tender to build two thousand houses. If the council would allow them to build the lot, so much the better, but if not, the bricklayers were content to begin on the first five hundred with a view to showing that they could build them quicker and better than the existing system and then to go on with the building of some more.

There were obviously a great number of practical difficulties to be overcome. The bricklayers are a small and composite body and this idea of a craftsmen's guild has been fomenting among them for some time, but it was by no means certain that other trade unions, notably the plumbers and the carpenters, whose participation is essential, would be willing to throw over the present system which they know and understand for the risks and uncertainties of a daring experiment. This difficulty has already been overcome. Without exception all the trade union bodies that have already been enumerated have promised their vigorous support to the scheme.

The second obstacle was the question of finance. The builder who takes on a big contract has large financial resources. But a workmen's guild would be starting, so to say, with no resources at all except—and this of course is a tremendous qualification—its

own labor. It was pretty clear that as soon as the Manchester city council began to pay out its customary advances of money on the work actually in operation the Guild Committee would be able to carry on, but the question arose first how it would pay its way before the city council payments were available, and secondly whether or not the council could be induced to forego the financial security which it properly and invariably exacts from contractors to whom it gives out an important piece of work. As to the first point, the banks have already shown that if the Guild Committee produces evidence, which it will be able to do, that it can command a proper supply of labor, they will grant sufficient credit to enable operations to be carried on during the preliminary period.

The question of the financial security to be given to the city council was more difficult, but the promoters of the scheme could put forward a strong case. "It is perfectly reasonable," they said to the council, "that you should demand large financial guarantees from a contractor. Those are all that he is able to offer you. On his financial strength mainly depends his ability to carry out the contract, for he cannot guarantee to you that he will be able to command sufficient labor, that is to say, the power of production. It is, however, precisely the power of production that we, on our side, are able confidently to offer you. We can show you that we have available all the bricklayers of this area and as many carpenters, joiners, etc., as are needed. It would therefore be wholly unreasonable of you to demand that we should offer you the same financial security as a man who is in no position to offer you production. Moreover, although we have no desire whatever to threaten you, we wish to point out that owing to our control of the power of production we are in a position to withdraw from any builder or contractor the labor which he needs to carry out your contract. What use, let us ask you, would be a contractor's financial security if we, the Guild Committee, say that we will not provide him with the necessary labor?" The representatives of the council were naturally impressed by the argument and intimated that if and when the Guild Committee could report that it controlled the various branches of the essential labor, it would be disposed to look favorably on the relaxation of the customary financial clauses. The Guild Committee has now secured the assurances of trade union support which it desires and it may be said therefore with some confidence that the second difficulty also is in a fair way to be overcome.

## Getting the Materials

**T**HERE are some minor problems. One is the question of building materials. Some of these are provided by the city council itself, such as the bricks, of which there is nowadays a scarcity. Others are obtained by private enterprise and the Guild Committee claim that they are not only in as good a position as the contractors but that they are actually better able to obtain all the materials that are needed. That remains to be seen, but it is very unlikely that a scheme so well worked out and so enthusiastically supported would come down over a practical detail of this kind.

Then there is the question of the legal organization which must be assumed by the workmen if they are to undertake contracts as a responsible body. As trade unions they cannot legally engage in trade. But there is nothing to prevent them—and this is what they propose to do—forming a legal trust of a very few persons in whom will be vested all the plant and material of every kind that is used in the work of construction.

Again, there is the concrete problem of the working of the scheme and the management. Who is to have the directorship, the control and the supervision of all this complicated business? The difficulties are not so great as they appear. The Guild Committee will employ and pay the most skilled men available for the higher posts. Some of them they will obtain from their own ranks, some they will draw from outside, just as would be done if the state, a municipality, or a private firm of contractors were carrying on the business. The same holds true also with regard to foremen and matters of discipline. It is an experiment, of course, but the originators of the scheme, and they are mostly trade unionists, assert that with the hearty support of the trade unionists behind them the ma-



"I'd like for him to be on the force if you won't make 'im do any fightin'."

—Alley in the Memphis Commercial Appeal.

(Concluded on page 12)